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ABSTRACT

Although Liverpool (England) has experienced a declining school population since 1961, it has not experienced declining educational costs. This is partly because reorganization of grade divisions, school construction as part of unemployment relief, and expansion of prenursery schools all created additional schools. Also, many problems are associated with the attempt to save money by closing schools. First, it is difficult to determine whether a school is under capacity because definitions of minimum capacity are subjective. There was also a previous lack of political will to close schools with shrinking populations because of support for reduced class size and pupil/teacher ratios. A consequence of a lack of school closure policy was an increase in costs for items like heating, lighting, and maintenance. Furthermore, local authorities are limited in their ability to shed staff both by legislation regulating redundancy agreements and by teacher contracts. In addition, educational planning problems in Liverpool are intensified by the size of the voluntary school sector, which receives significant financial support from the local education authority. Fear of political repercussions makes termination of support for such schools improbable. Proposals for the closure of county schools have been politically controversial. Small-area population projections may play a useful diagnostic role in the identification of schools for closure. (JM)

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Chapter 13

SCHOOLS AND POPULATION CHANGE IN LIVERPOOL

PETER J. B. BROWN and STEPHEN S. FERGUSON

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Chapter 13

SCHOOLS AND POPULATION CHANGE IN LIVERPOOL

PETER J. B. BROWN and STEPHEN S. FERGUSON

In recent years, attacks on public expenditure have frequently included reference to the savings which could be effected as the number of pupils in schools declines in accordance with the demographic trend. This argument, based upon the assumption that the education system expands and contracts in line with pupil numbers, has a strong appeal to those who seek to limit government expenditure. However, the strength of its logic requires closer scrutiny and an understanding of the educational, political and organizational dimensions which impinge upon the educational system. An opportunity for undertaking such an examination is provided in Liverpool, a city which has experienced population decline and falling pupil numbers over a far longer period than that indicated by the overall national pattern. In this respect an examination of Liverpool's response to the declining school population over that period may serve to highlight some of the factors and issues associated with educational planning which either confirm or refute the logic of relating declining pupil numbers to a reduction in cost.

Demographic decline from the 1930s to the 1970s

The population of the area that is now Merseyside reached its peak in 1961 (Chapter 11), but with the exception of the immediate post war period, Liverpool has experienced almost continuous depopulation since the 1930s. The census of 1931 recorded a total Liverpool population of 856 072, although other sources suggest that the peak came in 1935 at 857 350 (Fig. 13.1). Subsequent censuses have charted the progressive decline in numbers, with the 1981 figure of 510 306 indicating a fall of 40.4% over the fifty-year period since 1931.

An overall fall in population affects the prosperity of an area and its rate income, but an immediate impact on the education system is felt through the associated decline in the school-age population which the system is required to accommodate. With something of a lag, the school population is related to the number of births recorded, which is itself a function of the birth rate. Figure 13.1 illustrates how the annually recorded births and total population in Liverpool have varied in the years between 1930 and 1980. From this it can be deduced that these five decades have witnessed both a substantial overall decline and short term fluctuations in child population. The unprecedented and continuous decline in births recorded in Liverpool was particularly significant during the recent period from 1962 to 1977. The scale of this decline is underlined when expressed in round numbers: from a total of 16 479 births in 1962 to only 6166 in 1977, a fall of 62.6%.

This fall can be explained in part by the large-scale migration out of the city that took place during this period. The loss of population had the effect of accentuating the impact of the concurrent fall in the birth rate, as can be seen in Figure 13.2 in which both the annual birth rate and number of births for the years 1960 to 1980 are plotted, and the points representing the birth rate and the number of children born in 1960 coincide. Had the population of the city remained constant at the 1960 level, the sets of plotted points would have continued to coincide. However, the decrease in the number of children born was much more pronounced than that displayed by the underlying birth rate trend, reflecting the significant movement of population out of the city throughout this period. Since, in

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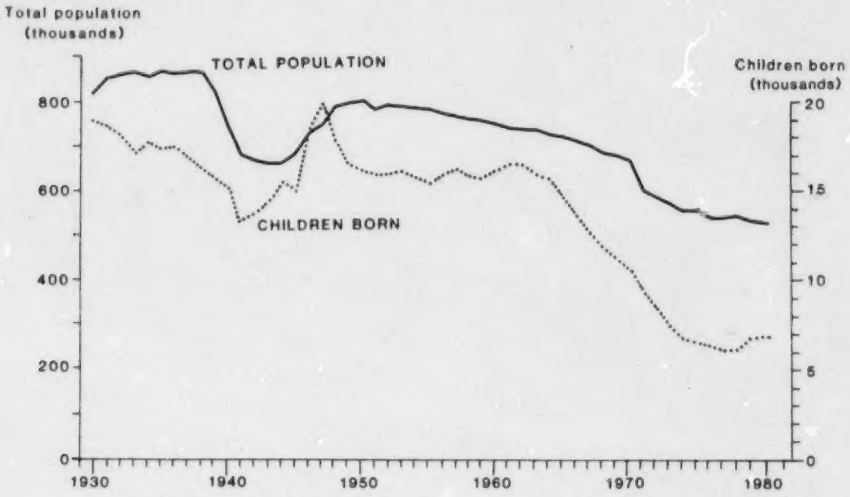

Fig. 13.1 Total population and number of children born to residents of Liverpool, 1930–1980

addition, the city was losing women of childbearing age at a greater than average rate (Liverpool City Council, 1977), this had a further adverse effect on the level of school population, as school-age children as well as the new-born were emigrating with their families.

The city-wide view of a falling child population masks important local variations within the city caused by the local pattern of population movement, much of which was a result of political decisions to clear property designated as "slums" and to provide new housing on the periphery of the city. Although this internal migration has had a significant effect on school provision over the last twenty years, as will be discussed later, even as early as 1948 the Director of Education was anticipating a decline of some 45% in the population of parts of the inner city, while the population in some of the peripheral housing estates was forecast to rise by more than 200% (Magnay, 1948). The Director's Development Plan for 1948 took into account these variations, and outlined specific plans for the closure of some schools and the opening of others.

The context for decline: changing education policy

The response of the Local Education Authority (L.E.A.) to both the demographic trend and migration has been complicated, however, by the need to respond to parallel political decisions of both central and local government which have taken place throughout the period. These decisions have affected the nature of the school system itself, and have often been expansionary in character. For example, the 1944 Education Act placed a responsibility on L.E.A.s to phase out the former all-age elementary schools. Liverpool initially opted for a tripartite grammar/technical/modern school system, and adapted existing schools and built new ones to accommodate the new school types. Then in the mid 1950s the further reorganization of those schools was debated, and there began a piecemeal shift towards the establishment of comprehensive schools. The process of change-over, with all its building implications, was virtually complete in 1976 in the maintained sector, but in contrast the Roman Catholic sector remains selective at the time

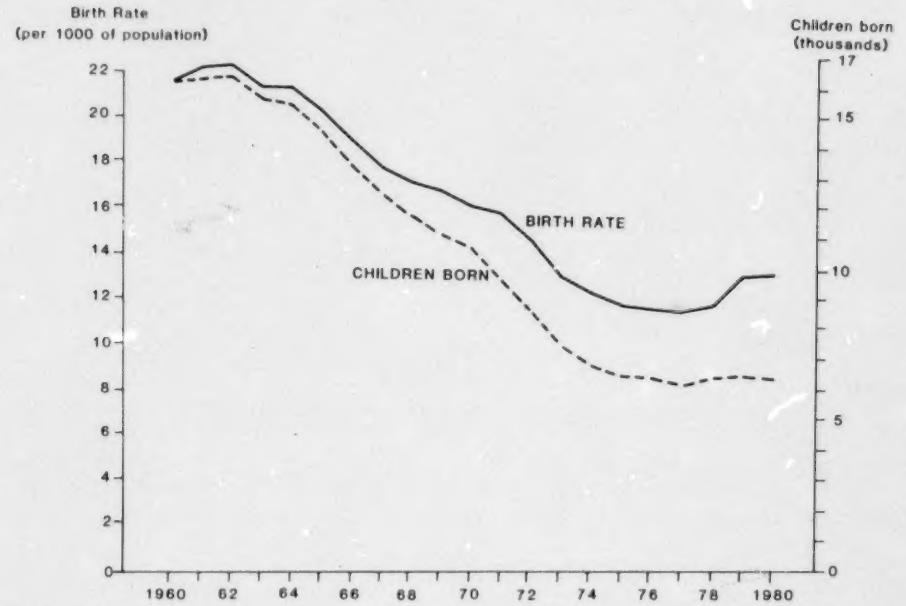

Fig. 13.2 Birth rate and number of children born to residents of Liverpool, 1960–1980

of writing (1981). The 1944 Act and subsequent regulations also imposed upon authorities new standards for school buildings and sites, and to meet these there was a gradual phasing out of inadequate buildings and the acquisition of new land.

Other national initiatives and decisions have affected the local response to the fall in child population. In the early 1960s and 1970s, for example, the modernization and construction of new schools featured in unemployment relief programmes. Similarly, in the early 1970s further new school construction was generated by the release of loan sanctions to permit the replacement of pre-1903 school buildings. As matters of national policy, pre-school nursery provision was expanded, and the school leaving age was raised by one year to sixteen years. Liverpool has also benefitted from the Urban Aid Programme and, more recently, from the Inner City Partnership arrangements which have impinged upon education by making available funds for its development, though in some instances extra resources have been released at short notice without sufficient time to enable the expenditure to be fitted into longer-term strategies. Over a period of years, Liverpool's shift from the tripartite to the comprehensive system permitted a simultaneous rationalization of secondary school provision and the achievement of a more equitable spatial distribution of facilities. However, the gestation period for some politically-inspired projects can be very long indeed, and can easily exceed six years in the case of new school programming, planning and construction. Over such a period of time, demographic change can continue apace, and new political decisions may well diminish the validity of earlier proposals. Liverpool is not the only authority to have built a new school to find the catchment area depopulated as a result of planning and housing decisions inspired by national and local changes in political direction and policy. It is clear that the planning of a response to the decline in child population has taken place within a constantly shifting field

which has been subject to simultaneous pressures for both the expansion and contraction of education facility provision.

Given the policies adopted both nationally and locally for the development of the education system, it is not surprising that Liverpool's expenditure per pupil increased during the 1960s at a faster rate than inflation. The growth in resource allocation reflected decisions based upon the relative worth of education as an investment and assessments of the qualitative needs of the education system. Indeed the prevailing wisdom of the 1960s, again at the national as well as local level, was that an increased per capita investment in education was an indispensible condition for the achievement of greater equality of opportunity and national economic prosperity. This goes a long way towards explaining why, for some considerable time, the overall fall in pupil numbers in Liverpool was not perceived to be a problem. On the contrary, the decline was judged to be fortuitous in as much as it was felt that many schools and classes in the city had long been unacceptably overcrowded, and the reduction in intake was viewed as a means of reducing the crush.

The problem of school size and capacity

The "capacity" of individual schools and therefore the capacity of the school system is initially based upon the maximum number of pupils which the Department of Education and Science (D.E.S.) considers to be appropriate for the premises. Once the capacity is designated, however, the actual number accommodated in the school can be allowed to rise to an upper limit beyond which approval from the Secretary of State is required. The determination of the actual numbers which can be accommodated is frequently decided less by the formal regulations than by subjective and qualitative judgements about whether a school is "under-used" or, alternatively, "generously" provided with rooms for libraries, individual pupil study-rooms, resource rooms, staff accommodation and rooms in which community activities can be conducted. Similar judgements apply when a school is considered to be "full". Is a school full because the accommodation of additional pupils would require that non-teaching space would have to be relinquished? Can a full school accommodate more pupils through the provision of mobile classrooms in the school grounds? Even when a figure is established to represent capacity it is impossible to ensure that a school rigidly adheres to its designated capacity while it is subject to demographic and market demand forces beyond its control. These subjective judgements make it equally impossible to look back upon the 1960s and 1970s and conclude with certainty the degree to which Liverpool schools were either "over-crowded" or "under-used".

In the 1960s admission areas for county primary schools were introduced. This administrative device was designed to ensure that there would be an equitable distribution of demand for school places across the city. This was achieved by matching each school to an admission area which contained the appropriate number of school-age children. Such a system worked well as long as there was a good match between designated school capacity and stability of demand for school places in the admission area. In this sense it was successful in limiting the maximum demand pressure on each school. However, when the school population in individual areas fell and the supply of places exceeded the demand, pupils were able to cross admission area boundaries. Thus, a popular school in an area of pupil depopulation drew pupils from beyond its boundaries (Masser and Ferguson, 1977). In the final stages of reorganization of county secondary schools in Liverpool in the 1970s, the admission area principle was again employed to determine the catchments from which most schools would draw their pupils. However, the poaching problem was not solved at the secondary level either, and those schools perceived by parents to have a high prestige experienced excessive demand while adjacent, less popular comprehensives were depleted.

TABLE 13.1 *Distribution of primary school or department size in Liverpool, 1960, 1974 and 1981*

Department or School Size Range	1960	1974	1980
721+	1	—	—
661–720	2	—	—
601–660	3	—	—
541–600	2	3	—
481–540	10	4	—
421–480	12	12	6
361–420	23	12	8
301–360	55	26	13
241–300	66	51	35
181–240	75	63	57
121–180	41	67	88
61–120	17	30	48
1–60	—	—	4
Number of Schools or Departments	307	268	261
Number of Pupils	84 154	62 915	47 640
Mean Size	274	235	182

Matching capacity and demand

Dependent as it is upon such a wide range of subjective factors and political judgements, it is unlikely that the designated capacity of the school system will closely match the pupil population trend. This is clearly borne out in Liverpool where, although the primary school age population fell by 43% between 1960 and 1980, the number of primary schools or departments only decreased by some 15% over the same period (Table 13.1). It is evident that this net change in the school stock conceals the total amount of change in the system, as throughout the period some schools were closed or amalgamated while new ones were built. Nevertheless, the extent of the fall in pupil population was such that the average number of children accommodated in each of the remaining individual units decreased significantly from 274 to 182, a fall of almost exactly one-third. This decrease reflected a marked shift in the distribution of the sizes of individual primary schools and departments. In 1960 almost 40% of schools or departments accommodated over 300 pupils, but in 1980 only 10% catered for more than this number (Fig. 13.3).

Most of the net reduction in the number of primary school units took place before 1974. This year is singled out as it marked the point at which the city broke from the tradition of majority political control, and began a lengthy phase of shifting minority government, characterized by an inconsistent political direction of education policy. Indeed it is notable that it has been in the years since 1974, when the effects of the decline in the birth rate and child population have been at their most acute, that there seems to have been a marked slow-down in the rate of decline in the number of primary schools. Between 1960 and 1974 the primary age pupil population fell by 25% and number of school units by 13%, but

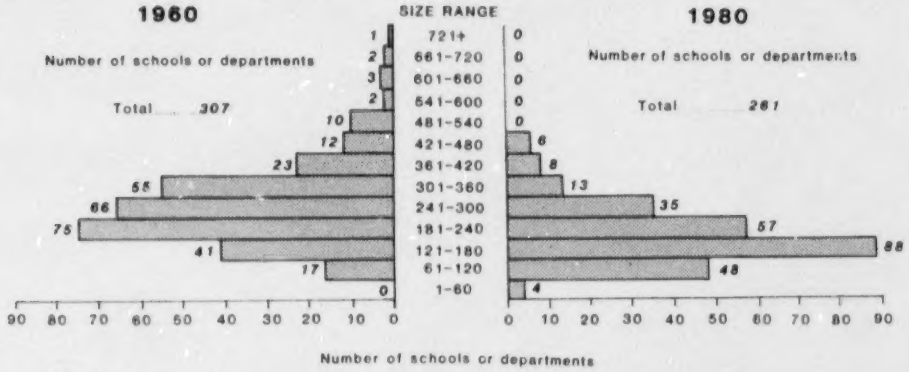

Fig. 13.3 Distribution of primary school or department sizes, Liverpool, 1960 and 1980

between 1974 and 1980 pupils dropped by another 24% and school units by only 3%. Much of the net reduction which took place in the 1960s was the result of the efforts directed towards the withdrawal of out-of-date buildings, referred to above, to which the reduction in capacity was in many ways coincidental.

The lack of decisive policies to bring the supply of primary school places more into line with the reduced pupil population was clearly influenced by the ambiguity surrounding the number of pupils who could be accommodated within the system. However, it is also true that there was a distinct lack of political will to address the problem. In many ways this was not at all surprising, since the effect of continuing to maintain schools as pupil population declined was to improve the per capita provision of space for each pupil and to reduce class sizes and pupil/teacher ratios, for all of which there had been both national and local enthusiasm. One further consequence of the lack of determined policy on school closure or amalgamation was to increase the unit cost of education, because costs such as heating, lighting, maintenance and rates are related to the number of premises in use rather than to the number of pupils served. Thus, the unit costs of education, already rising as a result of national and locally generated developments, were further increased by the running expenses of the system.

Since approximately 60% of the costs of operating a school are earmarked for staffing, most significant savings can be achieved through a reduction in staff. Local authorities are limited in their ability to shed staff both by the legislation which regulates redundancy agreements and by the contractual arrangements which exist between them and their teachers. Making staff redundant could lead to substantial compensation payments, while at the same time mobilizing the articulate and politically aware teaching profession. It is unlikely, therefore, that the enforced redundancy of teachers would ever be a politically attractive course of action at either local or national level.

The changing circumstances of the 1970s

As long as the level of central government support for local services was maintained, the increased unit costs of the system did not present a critical problem for Liverpool. From the mid 1970s, however, circumstances changed. In response to the declining state of the economy, the central government campaign for cuts in public expenditure gathered momentum. This campaign also coincided with a perceptible shift of public support away

from education. A significant marker of this movement was a speech by Prime Minister Callaghan at Ruskin College in October, 1976, in which he cast doubt on the value-for-money being obtained from the education service. The impact was all the greater since it was virtually unheard of for a Prime Minister to make pronouncements on education policy. Local authorities now found themselves in a new and more hostile environment. Revenue expenditure was to be reduced, but the duties and responsibilities of the authorities were to remain the same. Furthermore, the capital building programmes of the 1960s, initiated in response to national pressure, had significantly increased the financial burden of local authorities. At the same time not only was public expenditure to be cut, but local authorities were to be the major agents of that cut. They were being urged to take the initiative in cutting their own services, while being asked to evaluate these same services in terms of value-for-money.

With staffing costs accounting for some 60% of Liverpool's revenue expenditure devoted to education, it was inevitable that savings would have to be made in that area. Lacking the political will to pursue a staff redundancy policy and thereby incur the wrath of the teachers' associations, Liverpool began a policy of restricting the recruitment of staff. An indication of the severity of contraction is provided by the substantial reduction in the number of new teachers recruited from training institutions, which fell from 755 in 1973/4 to approximately 170 in 1977/8. When the redeployment scheme agreed between the Authority and local branches of the teachers' associations failed to produce any significant movement of staff between schools, the Authority introduced a programme of early retirement. The net effect of the reduction in recruitment, early retirement and natural wastage did eventually enable savings to be made in the budget, but the educational price paid for this policy was to threaten the range of subjects offered in many schools. Headteachers of both primary and secondary schools were forced to evaluate the curriculum and opportunities offered to pupils and to make difficult decisions about which of a choice of teaching posts was to be replaced. A one-for-one replacement of staff was a diminishing luxury. For City Councillors the political risks attached to this policy were balanced by the political gains which were expected to arise from the considerable financial savings and reduction in the local rate demand consequent upon lower staffing costs.

One of the solutions to declining staffing and the attrition of the curriculum was to

TABLE 13.2 *Number and mean size of primary schools or departments by type of school in Liverpool, 1960, 1974 and 1980*

School or Department Type	Number of Schools or Departments (Mean Size)		
	1960	1974	1980
County Primary	158 (277)	148 (238)	140 (196)
Church of England (Aided)	20 (170)	13 (203)	13 (164)
Church of England (Controlled)	15 (207)	11 (168)	13 (140)
Roman Catholic (Aided)	113 (297)	95 (239)	94 (189)
Hebrew	1 (281)	1 (473)	1 (452)
Totals	307 (274)	268 (235)	261 (182)
Total Number of Pupils	84 154	62 915	47 640

Source: Department of Education and Science Form 7 (schools), compiled by City of Liverpool Education Department.

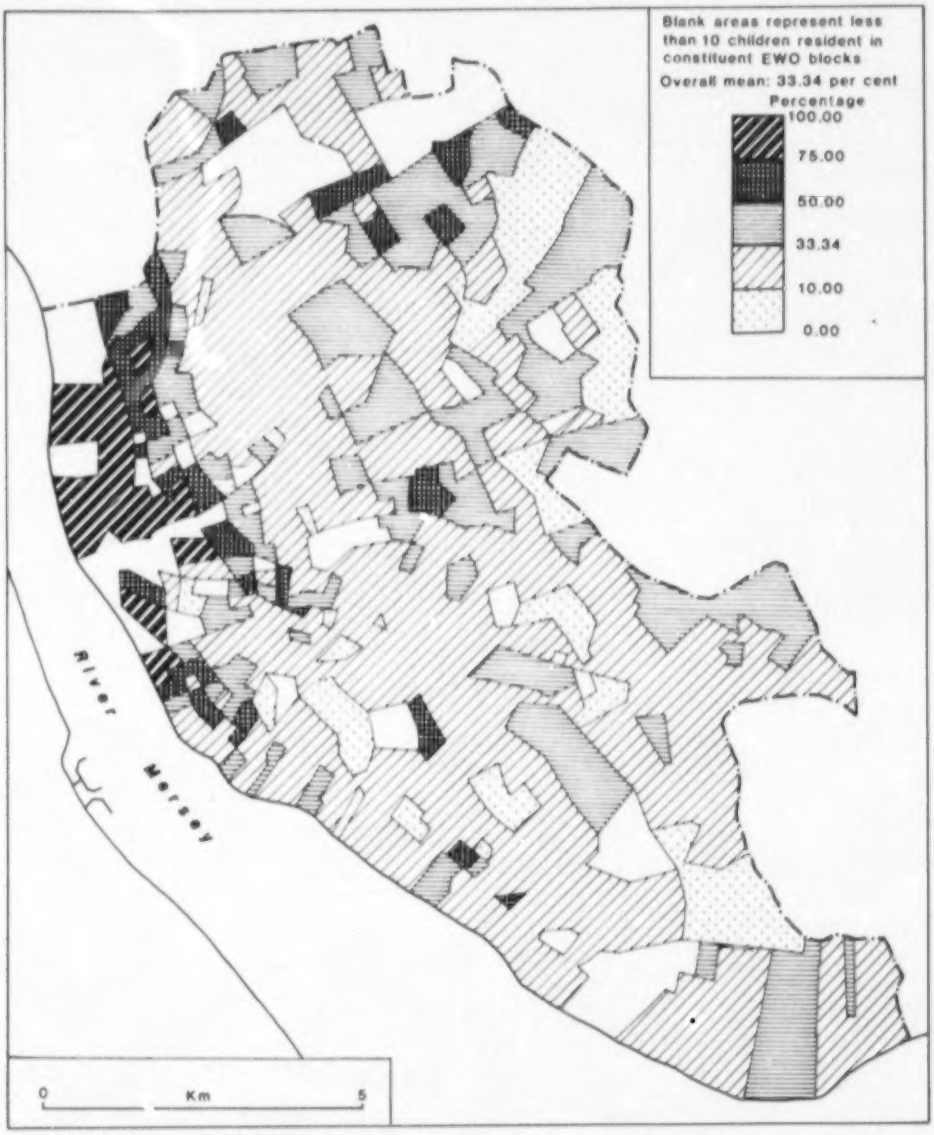

Fig. 13.4 Primary school children (aged 4–10) attending Roman Catholic schools or departments as a percentage of the total primary school age population, Liverpool, 1980

accelerate the policy of school amalgamation and closure. This would increase the size of individual schools and thereby increase the range of curricular opportunities. This argument was advanced in Liverpool, and was strongly reinforced by D.E.S. circulars, sponsored research, reports from Her Majesty's Inspectors and public statements by Secretaries of State. Although the apparent educational justifications for pursuing an amalgamation and closure policy were seen to be convincing, the statutory power to close schools lies with the Local Authority, and in Liverpool there did not exist a sufficiently strong political will to carry through a significant number of closures. As noted earlier, the pace of closure and amalgamation from 1974 was much slower than in previous years.

An additional dimension: the voluntary sector

At this point it is perhaps appropriate to describe some of the features of the educational system in Liverpool which go some way towards accounting for the apparently low level of commitment to a policy which simplistic logic suggested was essential. First of all, it is important to recognize that educational planning problems in Liverpool are made more difficult by the size of the voluntary school sector. Approximately one-third of the school population in the city is Roman Catholic, and educated in Roman Catholic voluntary schools. This is a larger proportion of voluntary school pupils than is found in any other city in England and Wales. In addition there is a small but significant Church of England sector (Table 13.2). The Local Education Authority is responsible for paying the salaries and a major proportion of the operating costs of all voluntary schools and not only of those in the Catholic sector. Yet voluntary schools are autonomous, and managed by separate denominational education authorities.

Roman Catholic children are not evenly distributed among all parts of the city (Fig. 13.4; see below for a description of the spatial units employed). Although the large scale slum clearance and rehousing programmes of the 1960s resulted in the migration of many Catholic families from their traditional locations in the northern inner parts of the city, the present day distribution remains remarkably similar to that which prevailed in 1948 (Magnay, 1948). The 1960s also witnessed the major school building programme to accommodate secondary pupils in the "new" grammar and modern schools, some of which were located in the outer estates to which the former inner city residents were encouraged to move. However, since then the birth rate among Roman Catholic families has fallen even more rapidly than that of the non-Catholic population, and there is now a very large surplus of places in Catholic secondary schools.

The size of the voluntary school sector in Liverpool suggests that it would need to feature in any move towards a reduction in school expenditure. It is possible for a local authority to follow a statutorily-defined procedure if it should decide to terminate its support for such schools. However, the likely political repercussions of such a decision, in a city with a voluntary sector the size of Liverpool's, render that course of direct action improbable. Instead the Authority has adopted the less controversial approach of encouraging and cajoling the church authorities to undertake a review of their own provision. It is no surprise that this has brought little progress towards the achievement of economies. The political difficulties within the voluntary sector in many ways parallel those in the local authority, and are no less involved. Despite three attempts since 1975 to reorganize its secondary school system in line with pupil enrolment, the Roman Catholic Authority in Liverpool had failed to alter a single secondary school by the end of 1981. During the same period only two Roman Catholic primary schools have been amalgamated. Furthermore, the size of the secondary sector has actually increased during this period as the national government policy of phasing out Direct Grant schools resulted in three Roman Catholic

schools opting to join the voluntary sector rather than becoming independent. The same process led the Church of England voluntary sector to increase by one secondary school.

Liverpool's political response

Proposals for the closure of county schools in Liverpool have also proved to be extremely contentious. Different schemes put forward by the Director of Education and by other interested parties have been variously rejected by Working Parties, Education Committees and City Council (Ferguson and Brown, 1979). The reasons for a distinct lack of conviction in following through such proposals can be ascribed largely to the minority political control of the City Council which has shifted uneasily between Liberal and Labour control since 1974. Proposals have also been subject to political factors at the national level. Since 1976 two schemes which represented compromises of interests within the City Council were rejected or modified by Secretaries of State: the first by Shirley Williams on the eve of the 1979 General Election and the second by Sir Keith Joseph in the wake of the 1981 summer riots. The closures which have taken place have not had a significant impact on average school size in the city, either in the primary or secondary sector. Although the curricular benefits of school closure schemes have been frequently cited by protagonists, opposition from parents and community groups has been sufficient to block many of the plans. School closure or amalgamation is seen by many interests to be the removal of a local service, often from areas where, due to depopulation, there has already been a retreat of other services and jobs. Primary schools, which over the years have established strong parent and community links as a means of improving the educational environment for children, have now found those same interests defending them from closure proposals. The notable instances where objections have not been significant have been those where headteachers, teaching staff, and the school governors supported the amalgamations, and where, in addition, the City has been able to direct Urban Aid and Inner City Partnership funds into the improvement of the premises into which displaced pupils will be moving. Objections to closure or amalgamation proposals at the secondary level have reflected, if not re-enacted, the comprehensive reorganization battles waged from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. The arguments advanced then concerning the "quality of education", "equality of opportunity", "elitism" and "parental choice" are all now being applied to proposals for restructuring the secondary system.

Anticipating the uncertainty in the political environment which was to accompany any attempt to close or amalgamate schools, the City Council established a "Reorganization and Development Working Party" which first met in 1977. The intention was that this Working Party, whose membership included teachers, councillors and representatives from Catholic and non-Catholic parents' associations, would provide both a forum for debate and a mechanism for co-ordinating consultation. Its operation proved otherwise. The disagreements which emerged within it replicated the divisions which existed within the Education Committee and City Council itself. The Working Party failed to agree upon any guidelines which could be applied consistently in order to bring about a programme of school closures. Indeed, its one firm resolution, stipulating what it called "the desirable minimum sizes of primary schools" and which might have been used as a criterion upon which to generate proposals, was vitiated by the rider that local social circumstances could secure the retention of a school which fell below the agreed desirable minima.

In the period from the establishment of the Working Party to the end of 1980, political decisions had been made to close two very small secondary schools and to reduce the form-entry of others, and then spread the available pupils more evenly among the remaining schools. Five small primary schools were amalgamated into two larger units, while pairs of junior and infant departments were merged to create combined junior and

infant schools. The scale of these actions is minute when contrasted with the Director of Education's own assessment of the problem. In 1976 he estimated that 91 primary schools or departments were substantially below the "desirable minimum size".

This apparent difficulty in reducing the number of school places in Liverpool is an indication of the profoundly political and contentious character of this planning process (Ferguson and Brown, 1979). It is this key feature of the process which tends to ensure that decision making will remain incremental in scale and effect. The local electoral process itself, with annual elections of one-third of the councillors, makes politicians reluctant to undertake a city-wide review of school provision which might provoke widespread hostility among the electorate. Seven years of minority government in the City Council has ensured, if nothing else has, that Councillors are particularly sensitive to the threat of being unseated. The shifting control has also disrupted the continuity of experience, knowledge and policy. Since 1974 there have been three different Chairmen of the Education Committee, and the tenure of each has been broken by changes in political party control.

The quest for a rational basis for decision making

Given the extreme political sensitivity of these issues there has been a search among educational planners in the City for indicators which might lead to politically acceptable solutions. On the one hand, officers are under pressure to find measures which will produce financial savings, but on the other hand they are well aware of the need to produce proposals which will be politically acceptable. Given this high degree of sensitivity there has been a diligent search for data which can be accepted as uncontentious. Population data and demographic trends are looked to as providing such a base. They have also been used to calculate unit costs, an index which can have credibility in political discussions.

The planning of school provision stretches the readily-available data beyond its limits. The decennial census is inadequate since there are only four to five years between birth and the start of schooling. In addition, the clustering of age groups in the census tables masks potentially important trends in births which may occur within the enumerated age groups, and in any event the age-group cohorts are not especially relevant to school planning needs. Liverpool has sought to overcome these limitations by making use of the population data collected and recorded by Education Welfare Officers (E.W.O.s) in the course of their duties. One part of an E.W.O.'s work is to ensure school attendance by pupils, and this requires them to know the location of pre-school children and the schools to which parents intend to send them. To preserve anonymity these data are aggregated to some 580 spatial units which are referred to as "blocks". The blocks aggregate in turn to primary school admission areas.

The E.W.O. blocks thus provide a useful set of areal units with which to assess future school demand, and the present authors have been closely associated with the Authority in undertaking an annual analysis of these data. When the block data are presented in map form they illustrate not only the variation in the rate of child population decline in different parts of the city, but also reveal quite clearly that decline is not restricted to the inner city. They further indicate how the task of planning future school provision in those areas traditionally associated with a falling population is complicated by their juxtaposition to areas of new housing in which marked short-term increases in child numbers are being experienced. The data reveal a considerable spatial complexity which to a great extent undermines the clearer guidance sought from what might have been seen as supposedly clear and uncontentious data.

Figure 13.5 illustrates the percentage change in the number of children of primary school age over the five year period, 1976–1980. This map and Figure 13.4 above are based upon

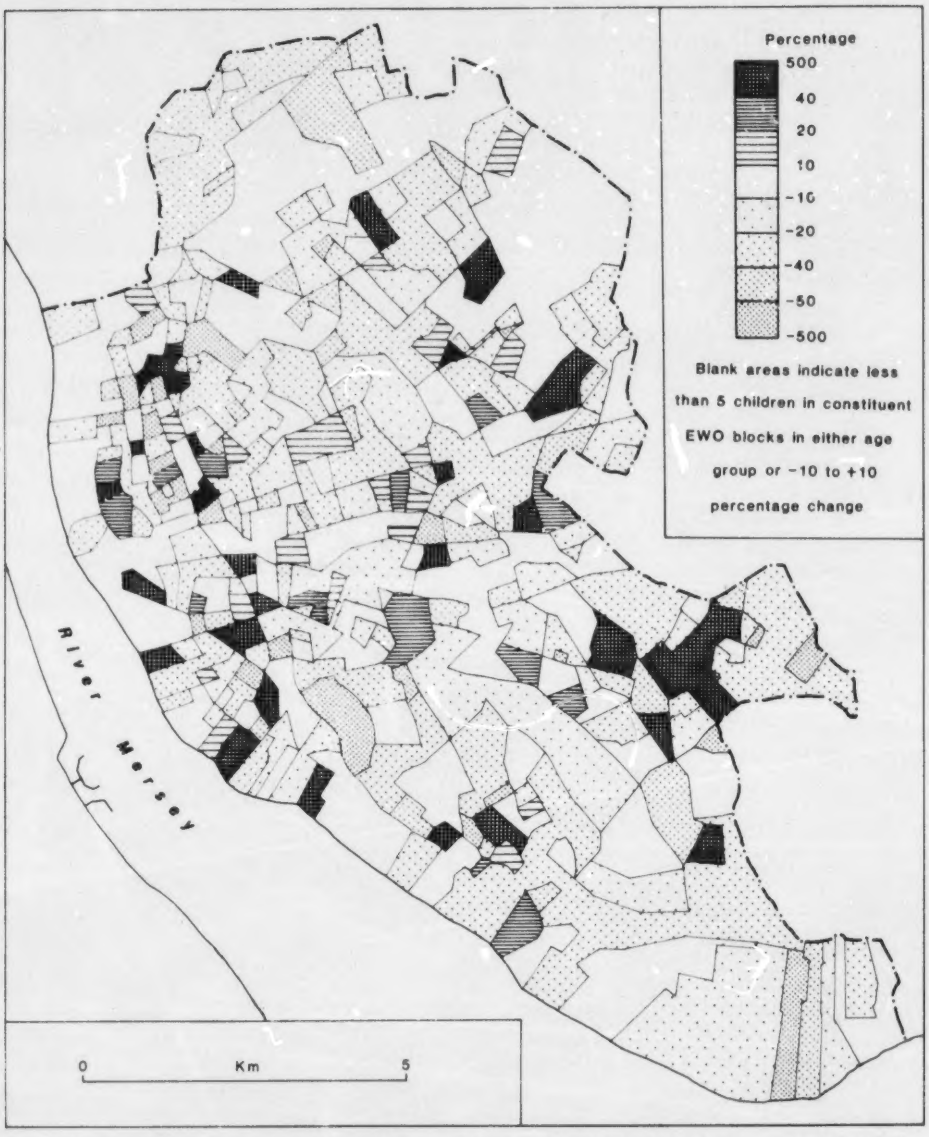

Fig. 13.5 Percentage change in numbers of primary school children (aged 4–10) in Liverpool, 1976–1980

E.W.O. block data, and contiguous blocks have been aggregated when they share the same data characteristics. The shading convention adopted in the map has been chosen to highlight those aggregated areas which have experienced a substantial increase or decrease in child numbers. Those areas which experienced a change of between plus or minus 10% have been left blank, while those experiencing a loss of more than 50% have been shaded with a dense stipple. Caution should be exercised in interpreting the map as children are not evenly distributed within each block or aggregated area. In addition some blocks are very sparsely populated, and these can be conveniently illustrated with reference to the "blank" area at the southern edge of the city where the airport is located and to the similar areas in the northeast which are predominantly open parkland.

During the five-year period, 1976 to 1980, the number of 4 to 10 year olds in the city declined from 57 103 to 47 040, an overall fall of 17.6%. Yet the most striking feature of the map is the incidence of high rates of increase in excess of 40% in some inner city areas. In most cases this can be attributed to major new housing developments which have taken place in areas cleared of housing in earlier years. In other areas it reflects the completion of a more modest scale of housing improvement and rehabilitation. The map also identifies areas experiencing a relatively large proportional decline. Although most of the blocks sustaining a loss in excess of 50% are found, as might be expected, in the inner city areas and in particular in the area to the north of the city centre, there are substantial areas in the outer parts of the city in which a similar order of decline has taken place, notably in the extreme south where Speke is located to the east of the airport. Decline has also been critical on the large but relatively isolated estate at Netherley, some 5 km north of Speke. Yet on this particular housing estate, built during the 1960s and early 1970s, four new primary schools and one ten-form entry comprehensive school (1500 plus sixth form capacity) were provided, all of which are now operating at less than capacity.

The patchwork pattern of child population changes illustrates the difficulties faced by the Education Authority in deciding upon an appropriate level of school provision to meet not only the immediate needs, but also those which can be expected in the foreseeable future. Larger school units will, of course, take pupils from a larger number of blocks, thereby averaging out the variations between individual blocks. Yet, at the primary school level this process is limited by the distance which pupils are expected to travel to school. Although the Education Act requires local authorities to provide free transport to pupils who live more than 3 miles from their school (2 miles for pupils under the age of 8), such distances are not the limiting factor in most urban areas. A more important criterion of catchment area size for primary schools will be what parents consider to be "acceptable". At the secondary level, the extension of parental choice and the ability of pupils to travel long distances by public transport have tended to diminish the value of small-area population projections in secondary school planning.

Concluding comments

Experience seems to suggest that small-area population projections are not the lodestones to provide the uncontentious base sought by administrators to identify schools for closure or amalgamation, but they can have a useful diagnostic role. Given the uncertainties of determining optimum school size and the difficulties in predicting patterns of family mobility within the city, small-area population projections have tended to be used to study the likely future enrolment trends for a school which has been brought to the attention of the Education Committee for reasons other than its small size. This is likely to occur if, for example, the school requires major building works, a head teacher has retired or the enrolment has declined to a point where there are manifest gaps in the curriculum provision. Political decisions about allocating extra resources to that school then have to be

made, and it is here that the population trends relating to its immediate catchment area can be invoked to provide additional evidence.

Demographers might find it strange that population data are relegated to such a confirmatory and subsidiary role in the planning of school provision. Nevertheless, this practice reflects political reality. The planning of school provision is a highly political exercise, and, in the sensitive environment of a city experiencing acute population and economic decline, it is inevitable that politicians will shy away from initiating unpopular actions. To single out a school for closure or amalgamation on demographic grounds alone has simply not proven to be politically feasible.

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